CONDUCTING RESEARCH

Primary Research

Summary: We live in an age overflowing with sources of information. With so many information sources at our fingertips, knowing where to start, sorting through it all and finding what we want can be overwhelming. This handout provides answers to the following research-related questions: Where do I begin? Where should I look for information? What types of sources are available?

Contributors: Dana Lynn Driscoll, Karl Stolley

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Research is not limited to published material that can be found on the Internet or at the library. Many topics you choose to write on may not have an abundance of sources and hence may require a different kind of approach to conducting research. This approach involves collecting information directly from the world around you and can include interviews, observations, and surveys.

If you are working on writing about a problem local to your school or community, you may need to conduct primary research. You may be able to find secondary sources (such as those found at the library or online) on the more general topic you are pursuing but may not find specifics on your school or town. To supplement this lack of sources, you can collect data on your own.

For example, Briel wants to research a proposed smoking ban in public establishments in Lafayette, Indiana. She begins by going to the library and then searching online. She finds information related to smoking bans in other cities around the United States, but only a few limited articles from the local newspaper on the ban proposed in Lafayette. To supplement this information, she decides to survey twenty local residents to learn what they think of the proposed smoking ban. She also decides to interview two local business owners to learn how they think the ban may affect their businesses. Finally, she goes and observes a town hall meeting where the potential ban is discussed.

Many different types of primary research exist. Some common ones used for writing classes include:

- **Interviews:** A conversation between two or more people in which one person (the interviewer) asks a series of questions to another person or persons (the interviewee).

- **Surveys & Questionnaires:** A process of gathering specific information from people in a systematic way with a set series of questions. Survey questions usually have pre-specified or short responses.

- **Observations:** Careful viewing and documenting of the world around you.

Conducting Primary Research

Summary: Primary research involves collecting data about a given subject directly from the real world. This section includes information on what primary research is, how to get started, and the different types of research you can do. It includes details about interviews, surveys and observations.

Contributors: Dana Lynn Driscoll, Allen Brizee

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➢ What is Primary Research and How Do I Get Started

Primary research is any type of research that you go out and collect yourself. Examples include surveys, interviews, observations, and ethnographic research. A good researcher knows how to use both primary and secondary sources in his/her writing and to integrate them in a cohesive fashion.

Conducting primary research is a useful skill to acquire as it can greatly supplement your research in secondary sources, such as journals, magazines, or books. You can also use it as the focus of your writing project. Primary research is an excellent skill to learn as it can be useful in a variety of settings including business, personal, and academic.

With some careful planning, primary research can be done by anyone, even students new to writing at the university level. The information provided in this handout will help you to get started.

➢ What Types of Projects or Activities Benefit from Primary Research?

1. *When you are working on a local problem that may not have been addressed before and little research is there to support it.*

   Example: You are conducting research on a proposed smoking ban in Lafayette, Indiana. Little information has been published about the topic other than a few editorials and letters to the editor in the local paper. You can conduct primary research in the form of surveying individuals in the surrounding community and local decision makers to gain more information.

2. *When you are working on writing about a specific group of people or a specific person.*

   Example: If you are writing about the activities of the Purdue Football team, one of the best ways to learn about the team is to talk to them and observe their behaviour.

3. *When you are working on a topic that is relatively new or original and few publications exist on the subject.*

   Example: If you wanted to write on the connection between the Purdue University Glee Club performance locations and estimated attendance of events, you would have to determine this yourself through primary research methods.

4. *You can also use primary research to confirm or dispute national results with local trends.*

   Example: If you are writing about people's opinions on Social Security reform, you could conduct a local survey and see how your local results compare to a nationwide survey conducted by the New York Times.

➢ What Types of Primary Research Can Be Done?

Many types of primary research exist. This guide is designed to provide you with an overview of primary research that is often done in writing classes.

Interviews: Interviews are one-on-one or small group question-and-answer sessions. Interviews will provide considerable information from a small number of people and are useful when you want to get an expert or knowledgeable opinion on a subject.

Surveys: Surveys are a form of questioning that is more rigid than interviews and that involve larger groups of people. Surveys will provide a limited amount of information from a large group of people and are useful when you want to learn what a larger population thinks.

Observations: Observations involve taking organised notes about occurrences in the world. Observations provide you insight into specific people, events, or locales and are useful when you want to learn more about an event without the biased viewpoint of an interview.

➢ Where Do I Start?

Consider the following questions when beginning to think about conducting primary research:

- What do I want to discover?
- How do I plan on discovering it? (This is called your research methods or methodology.)
- Who am I going to talk to/observe/survey? (These people are called your subjects or participants.)
- How am I going to be able to gain access to these groups or individuals?
- What are my biases about this topic?
- How can I make sure my biases are not reflected in my research methods?
- What do I expect to discover?

Conducting Primary Research: Interviewing

Interviewing is a great way to obtain detailed information from a single individual or a small number of individuals. It is very useful when you want to gain expert opinions on the subject or talk to someone knowledgeable about a topic.

➢ Types of Interviewing

Several different types of interviews exist. You should choose one based on the kind of technology you have available to you, the availability of the individual you are interviewing, and how comfortable you feel talking to people.

Face-to-Face Interviews: Face-to-face interviews are when you sit down and talk with someone. They are beneficial because you can adapt your questioning to the answers of the person you are interviewing. You will need recording equipment for the interview, and it is highly recommended that you bring two recording devices with you in case one fails.

Phone Interviews: Phone interviews can be used when you need to interview someone who is geographically far away, and who is too busy to meet with you to talk, or who does not want to use Internet technology. You have to purchase a special recording device for use with most phone systems.

Email Interviews: Email interviews are less personal than face-to-face or phone interviews, but highly convenient for most individuals. You may not get as much information from someone in an email interview because you are not able to ask follow-up questions or play off the interviewee's responses. However, email interviews are useful because they are already in a digital format.

Chat/Messaging Interviews: It is also possible to interview someone via an instant messaging service such as MSN Messenger, ICQ, or AOL Instant Messenger. These interviews allow you to talk to people at great distances and give you the benefit of adapting your questioning based on the responses you receive. Some people are not fluent at typing, however, so you may not get lengthy responses from this option.

➢ Arranging an Interview

When setting up an interview, be sure to be courteous and professional. Explain to the person being interviewed who you are, what you want to talk to them about, and what project you are working on. Do not be discouraged if not everyone you contact is willing to be interviewed.

➢ Interview Do's and Dont's

When conducting interviews…

- Do be careful of the types of questions you ask. *See the "Creating Good Survey and Interview Questions" section for more information.*
- Do start the interview with some small talk to give both yourself and the person you are interviewing a chance to get comfortable.
- Do bring two pieces of recording equipment in case something happens to one of your recording devices.
- Do pay attention to what is being said during the interview and follow up responses that sound interesting.
- Do come to the interview prepared. You should learn as much as you can about the person you are going to interview before the interview takes place so that you can tailor your questions to them.
- Do not pester or push the person you are interviewing. If he or she does not want to talk about an issue, you should respect that desire.
- Do not stick to your questions rigidly. If an interesting subject comes up that relates to your research, feel free to ask additional questions about it.
- Do not allow the person you are interviewing to continually get off topic. If the conversation drifts, ask follow-up questions to redirect the conversation to the subject at hand.

Conducting Primary Research: Surveying

Surveying is a great way to discover what a large number of people think about a particular issue or how a group of people report their behaviour. Surveys can be done on a large range of topics and can be conducted relatively easily.

➢ Things to Consider When Conducting Surveys

Who are you planning on surveying?

Decide what group you are going to focus on surveying based on who you have access to and what your research is focused on.

How many people are you going to survey?

You want to choose a target number of surveys to conduct. You do not want too few surveys because you would not have enough answers to support any generalisations or findings you may make. At the same time, you do not want too many surveys because you will be overwhelmed with analysing your data.

How are you going to survey people?

You can choose to conduct your survey in person (i.e. walk up to people and ask them questions); on paper (i.e. hand out surveys and ask people to return them); or even via the Internet. The survey method should be chosen based on the length of your survey and the types of questions.

How long is your survey going to be?

The answer to this question depends on what information you are attempting to discover and how much you want to find out. Longer surveys sometimes involve the same question asked in multiple ways to see if people are consistent in their answering strategies. For your first survey, however, it is better to keep things simple. Short questions are usually more effective than longer ones.

What type of questions are you going to ask? Do you want open-ended questions or closed questions?

Open-ended questions are questions that allow the participant any type of response. An example of an open-ended question is *"How are you feeling today?"* A closed question is one with a set of possible responses or yes/no responses. An example is *"Did you feel that the new campus regulation about parking was fair?"* While closed questions are much easier to analyse they do not provide the rich responses you may get with open-ended questions. Ultimately, what type of question you ask depends on what you want to discover.

What questions are you going to ask?

Carefully consider the wording of your questions.

Creating Good Interview and Survey Questions

If you are conducting primary research using surveys or interviews, one of the most important things to focus on is creating good questions. When creating questions, you want to avoid the following:

1. **Biased questions.** Biased questions are questions that encourage your participants to respond to the question in a certain way. They may contain biased terminology or are worded in a biased way.

   Biased question: Don't you agree that campus parking is a problem?
   Revised question: Is parking on campus a problem?

2. **Questions that assume what they ask.** These questions are a type of biased question and lead your participants to agree or respond in a certain way.

   Biased question: There are many people who believe that campus parking is a problem. Are you one of them?
   Revised question: Do you agree or disagree that campus parking is a problem?

3. **Double-barrelled questions.** A double-barrelled question is one that has more than one question embedded within it. Participants may answer one but not both, or may disagree with part or the entire question.

   Double-barrelled question: Do you agree that campus parking is a problem and that the administration should be working diligently on a solution?
   Revised question: Is campus parking a problem? (If the participant responds yes): Should the administration be responsible for solving this problem?

4. **Confusing or wordy questions.** Make sure your questions are not confusing or wordy. Confusing questions will only lead to confused participants thereby making the answers unreliable.

   Confusing questions: What do you think about parking? (This is confusing because the question is not clear about what it is asking--parking in general? The person's ability to park the car? Parking on campus?) Do you believe that the parking situation on campus is problematic or difficult because of the lack of spaces and the walking distances or do you believe that the parking situation on campus is ok? (This question is both very wordy and leads the participant.)
   Revised question: What is your opinion of the parking situation on campus?

5. **Questions that do not relate to what you want to learn.** Be sure that your questions directly relate to what it is you are studying. A good way to do this is to ask someone else to read your questions or even test your survey out on a few people and see if the responses fit what you are looking for.

   ***Unrelated questions*:** Have you ever encountered problems in the parking garage on campus? Do you like or dislike the bus system?

Questionnaire Design

Questionnaires must be designed carefully so that the answers given produce the required information: they should do so without influencing the people completing them. The following list contains points to consider when designing a questionnaire. Some of the points were discussed earlier, but there are a few additional ones that you need to bear in mind when constructing a questionnaire.

- **The questions should be worded to provide the information needed by the researcher.**
- **Care must be taken not to invade people's privacy, so questions that do not relate to the purpose of the questionnaire must be excluded.**
- **The questions should be capable of being answered reasonably quickly.**
- **The questions should be easy to understand and should not be ambiguous.**
- **The questionnaire should not contain biased or leading questions.**
- **Questions may have possible responses presented in a multiple choice, or YES/NO format.**

- **Where responses are provided, they should cover every possible answer.**
- **The responses provided should not overlap.**
- **The responses provided should not force people to answer in a way that they do not wish to answer.**
- **The questionnaire should be designed so that the results are easy to analyse.**
- **You should try out a questionnaire in a pilot study of a few people before using it with a large group of people. This will allow you the opportunity to alter questions that do not work well; for example, where they are misinterpreted.**

Conducting Primary Research: Observing

Observations are a type of primary research that involves spending time watching people or other creatures interact with each other and the world around them. Observations are used in nearly every scientific field and can be incredibly useful in gathering information.

➢ Types of Participation

Before observing, consider how you as an observer may alter the event being observed.

- How fully will you participate in the event?
- Will you simply sit, watch, and take notes with no interaction?
- Will you interact with the participants?
- Will you become a participant yourself?

These different choices can radically change what you end up observing. The mere presence of an observer may alter the events--and if you interact with participants, you further risk changing what takes place. The other side to this is that by not participating in an event, you may not gain a complete understanding of that event.

➢ How to Observe

When observing, it is especially important to separate observations from your feelings or reactions to observations. A good way to do this is to take your observations in a double-entry notebook. A double-entry notebook has two columns, one for what is directly observed and one is for what the observer interprets from the events. Here is an example:

Observation: The teacher walks around the circle and speaks to each student individually.
Interpretation: The teacher seems to want to make sure that each student understands the assignment.

If you are observing a group that is not found in public (such as a group of card players, a sports team, or a special-interest group), it may be wise to plan to spend multiple sittings with the group. This will allow the group some time to adjust to your presence (and hence, for you to get more accurate observations).

➢ Recordings vs. Note-taking

How will you be observing? Will you be taking notes in a notebook? With a laptop? Will you be recording your observations in some way (with a digital camera, video camera, digital recorder, etc.?

How you choose to observe is another important consideration that can affect the quality and results of your observations. Remember that you cannot capture everything that takes place with a recording or by even by taking detailed notes.

➢ What to Observe

Observational skills require some practice. The key to being a good observer is to pay attention to the details of a situation, write as much as you can, and write it as detailed as possible. Before you observe, you should consider how you will focus your observations -- because you cannot focus on everything.

Source: Prudue Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). *What is primary research and how do I get started?* Purdue University. Retrieved February 20, 2023. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/conducting_primary_research/index.html

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